

White Paper

Report ID: 105718

Application Number: ME-50005-12

Project Director: James R. Grossman

Institution: American Historical Association

Reporting Period: 2/1/2012-2/29/2016

Report Due: 5/31/2016

Date Submitted: 6/2/2016

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WHITE PAPER

AMERICAN HISTORY IN GLOBAL CONTEXT
AN NEH BRIDGING CULTURES AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES PROJECT

Project Director:	James Grossman, Director
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Grantee Institution:	American Historical Association
Grant Number:	ME-50005-12
Grant Period:	February 1, 2012 – April 29, 2016
Report Submitted:	June 2, 2016

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Summary:

American History in Global Context is a project of the American Historical Association, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities as part of the Bridging Cultures at Community Colleges initiative. The U.S. history survey is a required course for community college students in many states, and is often such students' only exposure to history—indeed, to the humanities more broadly. By focusing on the U.S. history survey course in a global context, this project aimed to reach the broadest possible group of community-college learners with a revitalized curriculum capable of sparking their interest in the humanities and offering them new ways of understanding both the nation's place in the wider world and their own place in the nation.

A four-year professional development program, *American History in Global Context* brought together pairs of faculty from twelve two-year community colleges for two intensive week-long seminars followed by a series of presentations at regional and national conferences. Drawing on the generation of innovative scholarship that has reframed our understanding of the nation's origins within a broad geographical and chronological context, the project built on the emerging concept of "rim" cultures. The first institute at the Huntington Library situated American history within the context of the Pacific Ocean—especially its eastern rim peoples and geomorphology—as a way of understanding three centuries of global connections in the history of imperial North America and the early U.S. republic. A year later, the second seminar at the Library of Congress employed the Atlantic World as a framework for exploring four centuries of intercultural contact, political and economic development, and the emergence of an American society on the precipice of Civil War. Because the Pacific Rim and the Atlantic World represent considerable strengths at the Huntington and the Library of Congress, respectively, time was allotted at each institute for the participants to immerse themselves in the libraries' collections. Each institute was structured to allow for extended group discussion as well as opportunities for extensive and distinctive research.

The third and fourth years of the project culminated in a diverse series of presentations given at two annual meetings of the American Historical Association and several smaller regional conferences in Texas, Florida, and Northern and Southern California, during which participants shared their work with one another, with key administrators at their respective institutions, and with a heterogeneous audience of students, faculty, and independent scholars.

Over the course of the program, participants revised their course syllabi and class structure based on the content and pedagogical techniques they had learned and shared with one another during the previous institutes. Participants submitted a wide range of class assignments, discussion questions, bibliographies, course plans, and reflections to the [Bridging Cultures: Atlantic and Pacific website](#). These resources are now available for use in community college classrooms across the country, expanding the reach of the program beyond the 12 participating campuses.

Overview of the Program:

To solicit applications, AHA publicized the program in a variety of ways: through the blog *AHA Today*, in the AHA's bi-weekly e-newsletter *Fortnightly News*, which reaches nearly 15,000 viewers, on the homepage of the AHA website, on the AHA Facebook page and Twitter accounts, in full-page advertisements in the inside cover of the March, April, and May editions of the AHA's newsmagazine, *Perspectives on History*, via direct e-mail messages to all 1,597 history faculty at our community and two-year colleges listed in the AHA database, and on posts in key H-Net listservs, including H-Teach, and H-Announce.

Interested community college faculty were instructed to apply in teams of two. The AHA received 26 applications, which included a Bridging Cultures application form, an NEH Applicant/Participant information sheet, a letter of interest, a sample U.S. history survey course syllabus, a letter of support from an administrator, and faculty Curriculum Vitae. The review committee members selected 12 teams to participate in the project along with five alternates.

The program participants assembled for two principal institutes. The first was led by William Deverell (University of Southern California and Huntington Library) and met from January 14-18, 2013, at the Huntington Library near Los Angeles, CA; it focused on incorporating the Pacific Rim into the US survey course. The second institute met from January 6-10, 2014, at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC; it was led by Philip Morgan (Johns Hopkins University) and focused on incorporating the Atlantic Worlds into the US survey course.

Each institute lasted five days, with a seminar in the morning and research time in the afternoon. Because the Pacific Rim and Atlantic World represent considerable strengths at the two libraries, time was allotted at each session for participants to immerse themselves in the library collections. Both rubrics offered multiple opportunities for curriculum development oriented toward topics of regional interest at the colleges of individual participants. Together, the two institutes encompassed the histories of interactions among the peoples of four continents and the island worlds of the Pacific Ocean.

During the first institute, faculty presenters built on preliminary shared readings that had been assigned in advance in order to introduce participants to a recent and growing historiography with a broad geographic and temporal scope. The readings emphasized contact among cultures and explicitly engaged the NEH *Bridging Cultures* theme by considering oceanic exploration and colonialism, first contacts and cross-cultural communication, imperial rivalries, global commodity trading, material culture, and environmental change. Participants engaged the new and fast-developing historiography of the largest region of the world, and considered the implications of this scholarship for grand narratives of the U.S. history survey in particular and humanities education in general. Those preliminary readings provided a shared framework from which participants could then pursue individual lines of inquiry in the collections of the Huntington Library, which include materials related to the Pacific from the 15th century onward (including maps, ships' diaries and other travel accounts, trade ledgers, art, and fiction). Of the impact that the first institute had on its participants (himself included), leader William Deverell reflected: "syllabi were revised or entirely re-conceptualized. Best practices were shared.

Participants headed into the astonishing archives at the Huntington, sometimes knowing just what they were looking for, and at other times returning to seminar astounded at what they'd found."

Following the first gathering, participants spent a year experimenting with ways of deepening their students' awareness of global interconnectedness using materials they'd gathered from the Pacific Rim institute. Participant Sarah Grunder, of the SUNY-Suffolk County Community College described the experimenting and connections she made this way: "In fact, on the first day of class (in the first half of the survey) I start with the Google Earth image of the Pacific Ocean... something we were introduced to during our visit at the Huntington." She went on to explain: "one area that we've repeatedly been ordered to assess and improve on is the student's understanding of the role of the U.S. in the world. The BC seminar fit right into this, and I've been able to use it not only in really concrete ways in the classroom, but also to satisfy accreditation officials, assessment officials, etc. that we are addressing ('closing the loop,' so to speak) areas where our students do not appear to be performing as well as the state would like." Reflecting on the connections she established with fellow community-college faculty, Professor Gruner reported "conversations that still continue between BC participants (we have a Facebook group!)."

During the program's first year, we implemented the AHA Communities listserv as a place for participants to share ideas and resources, to make contact with one another, to share news about regional events, and to post queries or suggestions about transforming their courses. On several occasions we also used the forum for seminar leaders to hold virtual "office hours." Over time, we realized that participants were networking far more effectively on their own, with regional communities and faculty, and that they were in fact too busy to use the listserv in the ways we'd first envisioned. It remained a tool, albeit one more suited to completing administrative tasks than to providing networking opportunities.

In January of 2014, *American History in Global Context* held its second major event, at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Historian Philip Morgan led the community college faculty on another exploration into the vast and varied connections between the U.S. and the world—this time through the larger and more established field of Atlantic World history. Considering a somewhat longer Early Modern period than that considered by the Pacific Rim institute, Atlantic World scholars presented lectures and facilitated discussions on the complex and consequential exchanges among Africa, Europe, and the Americas between 1450 and 1850. Pre-assigned readings and on-site activities examined five major aspects of the Atlantic World: 1) pre-contact civilizations of Europeans, Africans, and Amerindians; 2) the process of integrating these disparate worlds through contact and exchange; 3) the rise of new populations in Africa and the Americas who defined themselves by cultural hybridity; 4) the specific nature of New World revolutions in the late 18th- and early 19th centuries; and 5) the 19th-century differentiation of Atlantic World societies in terms of slavery, political systems, and flows of goods and migrants. Readings included broad, conceptual works, recent monographs, and articles addressing historiographical debates. The institute provided time for local site visits and individual research in world-class collections. The sessions in Washington

also addressed how faculty can meaningfully bring the complex and influential insights of more than a generation of rich scholarship into community college classrooms, where time and resources are limited. The Washington institute was deliberately scheduled to follow directly on the AHA's Annual Meeting; participants were encouraged to attend or present there.

The January 2015 annual meeting of the American Historical Association in New York City provided a venue for participants to share with a wider audience the ideas developed during the Bridging Culture program, and the lessons gained subsequently about classroom implementation of course revisions. One administrator from each of the 12 participating community colleges joined the faculty participants for this conference, enabling them to witness the presentations about revised and new courses—to ask and sometimes answer questions of and from faculty. Involving administrators and department chairs provided institutional support to participants, and helped to embed their achievements firmly on each campus. The annual meeting is an invigorating but busy and dispersed few days; nonetheless, participants were able to consolidate, in person, professional relationships and networks they had developed in the institutes and online over the previous two years of project programming.

In the fall of 2015, six participants in the Bridging Cultures program took part in regional conferences held in Texas, Florida, Southern and Northern California, delivering presentations on the changes made to their courses as a direct result of the program. Organized by faculty members and hosted by local universities (Univ. of Texas at Austin, Florida A&M Univ., California State Univ. Long Beach, and California State Univ. East Bay), each of these events, all of them free, offered forums and resources for addressing pressing issues that history programs, students, and instructors face in higher education today. The positive feedback from participants in these events demonstrated a widespread demand among faculty members for more opportunities to collaborate across institutional boundaries on teaching and curricula.

The first regional conference, held on August 28 and 29 at the University of Texas at Austin, focused on college-level introductory history courses and the pedagogical and policy issues that affect them. On October 8, Florida A&M University held a one-day symposium in Tallahassee to analyze what history majors learn, and how that knowledge and orientation aligns with employment needs and civic contexts in the Southeast. These regional events continued in California, first at California State University, Long Beach, on October 9, and the following day at California State University, East Bay. Workshop programs emphasized searching out and forming connections across instructional levels; faculties facing similar issues at different institutions valued the chance to learn from one another. Including the Bridging Cultures participants in these conferences helped to expand their networks and provided an opportunity to share their work with a wider audience.

The project culminated with a final session on “Transforming the US History Survey” at the January 2016 AHA annual meeting in Atlanta, GA. Bridging Cultures participants Shannon Bontrager, Georgia Highlands College, served as chair; Kimberly Hill, University of Texas at Dallas, and Joy Schulz, Metropolitan Community College, presented at the session along with two members of the AHA's Tuning the History Major initiative. They discussed the courses they

had transformed, why they changed what they do in the classroom, and what it has meant for students thus far. They shared strategies for addressing differences in student populations as well as incorporating original research and new historical scholarship. Finally, they revealed ways that conversations among faculty at different institutions can help revitalize history curricula from the bottom up.

Recordings of these sessions and interviews with participants, along with course materials, blog posts, and participant reflections from the four-year project have all been made available on the Bridging Cultures American History in Global Context website to serve as a resource for others who teach or administer the US survey course. Project directors worked with the AHA's website and blog staff to design the [resource pages](#), schedule participant [blog posts](#), and curate classroom materials and resources that now live on the [permanent site](#). Through marketing in AHA publications and social media, we continue to highlight the resources available on these webpages, seeking to draw in ever broader audiences.

Project Accomplishments and Successes:

The goals of *American History in Global Context* can be grouped into three primary sections, whose successes and challenges were determined in part through surveys supplied to participants at various stages in the project. The survey responses suggest a course average of 112 students in U.S. History. We multiplied that number by our 23 faculty participants to determine that an approximate total of 2,576 students were reached by this program per semester; for four semesters, that would mean 10,304 students.

The AHA's Bridging Cultures program sought first to deepen understanding of transnational influences in the American past in order to help faculty bridge cultural divisions in their classrooms and communities. A survey question designed to assess our success in this regard asked: "What impact has your participation in the Bridging Cultures program had on student learning?" A summary of responses suggests that the program helped participants bring new knowledge and methodologies to their classrooms. Survey respondents all reported having made constructive additions to their curriculum, which gave students "increased...appreciation of the global as part of the 'national.'" Respondents also described receiving positive feedback from the students themselves, many of whom were "much more interested in making broader historical connections than our traditional textbooks have allowed." One respondent concluded that "this program was the single biggest influence in my teaching and research over the past three years."

Participant Kelli Y. Nakamura described her objectives and students this way: "I applied to the American Historical Association (AHA) Bridging Cultures at Community Colleges Project to revise my American history survey courses by incorporating the latest historiography and research under the guidance of Pacific and Atlantic Rim experts. My decision to apply was greatly influenced by my experiences teaching history survey and upper division courses at Kapi'olani Community College—the largest community college in the Pacific that is a minority serving institution (MSI) with a student population of 4,497 (49.84%) Asian and 1,838 (20.37%) Pacific Islanders."

Our second overall goal was to stimulate and equip community colleges to explore global connectedness and cultural interactions in their curricula, especially in the U.S. history survey course. A survey question designed to investigate our implementation of this goal asked: “Has your participation in Bridging Cultures benefited your institution? If so, how?” Summary responses made clear that the Bridging Cultures program had a positive effect on participants’ *institutions*, particularly when they received support from administrators. Many respondents reported using their experiences to revise department curricula and create professional development opportunities for their colleagues. Institutions were pleased with the opportunity to bring “new methodologies and innovations on teaching US history.” Participation in this program helped institutions to not only receive additional grants but also to see the benefit in national professional development programs for their faculty.

Another survey question designed to assess our second goal asked: “Can what you learned from the Bridging Cultures program benefit part-time faculty at your institution? If so, how?” Over 90% of respondents answered that the Bridging Cultures program would benefit their institution’s part-time faculty. Many expressed enthusiasm about having “face-to-face discussions” as well as incorporating the curricular changes into the master course outlines for the entire department. This infusion of new research and methodological approaches will have far-reaching effects. As one respondent put it, “Many of our faculty members earned master's degrees and doctorates decades before the Atlantic framework (much less the Pacific) were the way that early American history was taught. We've done several sessions for faculty - both full and part time - at our institution to discuss the way we incorporate these themes into our teaching.”

Participant Tracy Lai of Seattle Central College regards “one of the main impacts of Bridging Cultures on Seattle Central’s teaching of the US history survey” as the resulting transition they made “from the two-quarter to a three-quarter split. The three quarters create more space for content coverage and process-oriented assignments.” To Lai, “the themes of early globalization have been invaluable.” She particularly enjoyed researching—and now teaching—“the paths of chocolate, tea, furs, porcelain and more,” that can “engage students in a dynamic manner.” Lai continues: “In general, my approach to teaching Asian American history has become more transnational. Through research at the Library of Congress I learned that some five thousand Chinese fled the west coast of the U.S. to Cuba in the late 19th century, hoping that the violent anti-Chinese attacks might be left behind. . . In rethinking identities within this Chinese Diaspora, I also reconsidered the even more complex identities within the African Diaspora as a function of the Atlantic Slave Trade.” Lai believes that Bridging Cultures “recalibrated” her teaching: “I ask different questions of myself and my students. We look for global patterns and connections that shaped and continue to shape the United States. Instead of looking inward – U.S. exceptionalism— I stand at the intersection of Atlantic and Pacific Worlds.” In September of 2014, Lai was part of the U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration’s education delegation, learning more about Cuba and its role in the Caribbean/Atlantic World.

Our third goal was to develop and extend professional networks among community college

history educators across the country in order to reinvigorate humanities study at two-year colleges. Participant Tim Draper of Waubensee Community College explains that the cohesiveness and impact of the group “sustained itself beyond the initial project. For example, I have had five of the participants review books for the peer-reviewed journal for which I serve as Review Editor. In addition, I have made 2 statewide presentations with my colleague Amy Powers on themes in transnational history that were directly influenced by my experience in the Bridging Cultures project. In addition, I participated in a panel discussing Bridging Cultures and the Tuning Project at the 2015 Community College Humanities Association. Finally, my participation this past summer in a Fulbright-Hays project to study human rights and religious diversity education in the Philippines stemmed from my Bridging Cultures experience, especially in my desire to explore the linkages between Spanish colonialism in the Atlantic and Pacific worlds.”

Participants found many ways to incorporate their experience in the Bridging Cultures program into their research, teaching, and publications. One used it as a model for a new Ethnic Studies course. Many respondents praised the opportunity to work at the Huntington Library and the Library of Congress. Participation in the program “provided a needed exposure to current historical scholarship and focus, which have now made their way into my courses.” In addition to improving curriculum, multiple respondents reported having used their experience to advance their own research and publishing agenda, which will bring the Bridging Cultures program to an even wider audience.

Conclusion:

The U.S. history survey is a required course at community colleges across the country. It serves as many students’ principal—sometimes only—exposure to history in a college classroom. It is also an indispensable component of citizenship: a place for students—many of them raised in first-generation households or new immigrants themselves—to discover what it has meant to be an American and how democratic institutions developed over time. The American Historical Association’s “Bridging Cultures” initiative guided community college faculty—the country’s fastest growing sector of higher education and surely some of its busiest instructors—through a series of workshops meant not only to reframe and reinvigorate their work in the classroom, but also to strengthen their ties with one another and allow them the time and resources to conduct their own research.

Because the program spanned four years, participating faculty were given the time to bring what they learned in workshops to the specific settings of their regionally- and institutionally-varied classrooms, and then reconvene with one another in order to discuss what worked and what did not. Joy Schulz, a faculty participant from Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Nebraska, summarized her experience with the program this way: “I realized that pursuit of excellence is possible no matter where one is teaching. I was also revitalized by my community college colleagues, whose zest for incorporating new approaches into their classrooms put my own, sometimes laissez-faire attitude to shame. Every January, including this one, when I return to my own classroom, I truly feel I have the best job on earth.” Philip Morgan, one of the project’s two faculty leaders, later described his participation in the “Bridging Cultures”

sessions at the American Historical Association's annual meeting in January 2015: "I attended all six sessions—the two PechaKucha panels devoted to incorporating the Atlantic and Pacific Worlds into the US History Survey Course and the four more conventional panels, on immigration, transnational voyagers, classroom methodologies, and Going Global in the US History Survey—and listened to the 27 individual presentations. The panels were uniformly stimulating; and it was fascinating to hear how the participants were integrating the materials to which they had been exposed, into the classroom." Morgan concluded by saying: "I sometimes hear from one or more of the 24 community college professors updating me on their progress. It was a privilege and honor to get to know them."

It was a privilege for the AHA as well to co-ordinate a project that included such diverse and committed faculty, working together to improve the content and methods of their teaching. We will continue to update the websites devoted to housing their materials and reflections, and keep in touch with participating faculty and administrators in order to assess the long-term impact of *American History in Global Context*.